

Novels as Social Media: How Literature Helped Shape Notions of Sexual Liberation

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Abstract In the historiography of sexual liberation, the role of cultural artefacts like novels and films has either been taken for granted or not received much attention at all. This article discusses these cultural dimensions of sexual liberation, using the Netherlands as a case study, arguing that these dimensions are important to research in order to better understand the (self-)fashioning of a sexually liberated subject. The seemingly close ties between literature and societal transformations in the sixties is remarkable and points to the function of literature in the 1945–1980 period, when novels functioned as an important social platform for broaching moral controversies and articulated seminal cultural repertoires for identity construction. The article analyses the ways literature functions in Dutch cultural memory of the sexual revolution nowadays, and looks at the specific historical constellation and literary culture that provided important channels for the spreading of new ideas in the 1960s. Guiding questions to investigate the specificities of this literary culture and its function in articulating and disseminating notions of sexual liberation are: what are the functions ascribed to writers and their works in sexual transformations of the 1960s/70s? To what extent are these transformations captured in terms of national identity, or do they travel across national borders? What role do they play in cultural memory, nationally and internationally?

Keywords Sexual liberation · The Netherlands · Literary fiction · Sexual reform movement · Gay and lesbian movement · National identity

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Introduction

In April 2006, the Dutch politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali opened an exhibition about the repression and resistance of homosexuals in Germany and the Netherlands during the Nazi regime in former detention and transit camp Westerbork.¹ At the time, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, of Somalian descent, was a member of the Dutch parliament for the liberal party (VVD). It was just one month before she would have to give up her parliament seat because of a documentary about her asylum story that would bring down the Dutch cabinet as well. Hirsi Ali's radical atheism, anti-religiosity, and harsh criticism of Islam in particular, were highly controversial in the Netherlands and abroad.²

She had become a public figure—figuring on *TIME* Magazine's list of most influential people in 2005—especially since her cooperation with film director Theo van Gogh on the short film *Submission* in August 2004, as a consequence of which Van Gogh was murdered in Amsterdam on 2 November 2004. One could wonder why she, of all people, had been invited to open this exhibition on homosexuals during the Second World War, two topics that she was not commonly associated with. Obviously, the combination of Hirsi Ali with inflammable topics like homosexuality and the Second World War would guarantee media attention, but why had not a victim been invited, or a homosexual politician?

As the study of memory has taught us, the way events are being remembered is as revealing about the past as about the present, and that was the case here as well. By inviting Hirsi Ali, the repression and resistance of homosexuals under the Nazi regime was framed within the context of actual Dutch debates, as became clear in her opening speech. In her speech, Hirsi Ali pitted gay emancipation in the Netherlands against the persecution of homosexuals in the Islamic world of her youth. To illustrate her point, she exemplified gay emancipation by referring to Dutch literature. These references to two famous Dutch writers, Andreas Burnier (pseudonym of Catharina Irma Dessaur, 1931–2002) and Gerard Reve (1923–2006) interest me here and therefore I will discuss them in more detail. Hirsi Ali starts with Burnier:

Lesbian women? That wasn't really a topic with us. When the writer Andreas Burnier—and here I don't have to tell that she was Jewish and a lesbian—had already written novels about love between women, my grandmother answered the question of how many children she had with 'One'. She had nine daughters and a son (Hirsi Ali 2006).³

In the context of this exhibition about homosexuals under the Nazi regime it may only seem appropriate for Hirsi Ali to refer to Burnier's lesbianism. She does so by

¹ This article is a revised and expanded version of my introduction to *Seks in de nationale verbeelding* (Andeweg 2015).

² In her latest book *Heretics* (2015), Hirsi Ali develops a new, less relentless attitude towards the Islam.

³ 'Toen de schrijfster Andreas Burnier—en ik hoef op deze plaats niet te vertellen dat zij joods en lesbisch was—al romans had geschreven over vrouwenliefde, antwoordde mijn oma op de vraag hoeveel kinderen ze had: "Eén". Ze had negen dochters en een zoon.' Translations of Dutch quotations are my own unless otherwise stated.

way of using the rhetorical device of *apofasis*—with an interjection in which she says that she does not really have to tell what she is telling, thus suggesting that this is well known information which is relevant for the occasion. Burnier, who survived the war in hiding at sixteen different addresses and who was separated from her parents for a period of three years, was persecuted however for being Jewish, not for being a lesbian. After all, she was only nine years old when the war began. Even though Burnier reported to have felt ‘different’ from a very young age—she would describe her desire to be a boy in her novel *Het Jongensuur* (Boy’s Hour 1969)—this certainly was not the reason she was persecuted by the Nazis. Hence, while her being mentioned here by Hirsi Ali does suggest a connection between Burnier’s lesbianism and Nazi oppression, this is hardly the case.

Hirsi Ali’s second example is a reference to the so-called ‘Donkey trial’ of 1966 in which the Dutch homosexual writer Gerard Reve was accused of blasphemy. Reve had published a controversial sexual fantasy in 1965, in which he imagined having sex with Jesus Christ reincarnated as a donkey. When questions were asked about this passage in parliament, Reve was tried and ultimately acquitted by the Supreme Court in 1968. Hirsi Ali explicates her unfamiliarity with Reve when she came to the Netherlands as an African immigrant:

I knew nothing about homosexuality. I knew nothing about Gerard Reve. A donkey in Africa would just pull the cart. There are several reasons why one of the most famous sentences in Dutch literature did not appear in translation with us: ‘When God once more lets himself be imprisoned in Living Matter, He will return as Donkey, only able to formulate a few syllables, unrecognized and despised and whipped, but I will understand Him and go to bed with him straightaway, but I will bandage His hoofs, so that I won’t get too many scratches if He thrashes about when He comes.’ (Hirsi Ali 2006).⁴

Here as well, Hirsi Ali assumes she is speaking to a well-informed audience. Only people who are already familiar with the Donkey-trial will get the joke about ‘a donkey in Africa’.

Sexual Nationalism

Hirsi Ali’s speech illustrates, firstly, the phenomenon that sexual liberation in general and tolerance of homosexuality in particular has become a prominent feature of Dutch identity, which is mobilized in current debates about the multicultural society.⁵ This ‘sexual nationalism’ is not an exclusively Dutch phenomenon. Jasbir Puar (2007) coined a variant of the term (‘homonationalism’) in

⁴ ‘Ik wist niets van homoseksualiteit. Ik wist niets van Gerard Reve. Een ezel in Afrika trok gewoon de kar. Er zijn meerdere redenen waarom een van de beroemdste zinnen uit de Nederlandse literatuur bij ons niet in vertaling verscheen: “Als God zich opnieuw in Levende Stof gevangen geeft, zal Hij als Ezel terugkeren, hoogstens in staat een paar lettergrepen te formuleren, miskend en verguisd en geranseld, maar ik zal Hem begrijpen en meteen met hem naar bed gaan, maar ik doe zwachtels om Zijn hoefjes, dat ik niet te veel schrammen krijg als hij spartelt bij het klaarkomen”’.

⁵ For an introduction to the Dutch context, see Dudink (2012) and Mepschen et al. (2010).

her analysis of American atrocities in the Iraqi prison Abu Graib. According to Puar this explosion of violence had everything to do with an assumed opposition between western, ‘liberated’ sexuality on the one hand, and Islamic ‘repressed’ sexuality on the other. This opposition is also constructed in current Dutch debates about homosexuality. In this sexual-nationalist discourse, homophobia has become antagonistic to Dutch values, and Islam is regarded as the most important threat to these values. Acceptance of homosexuality, and to a certain extent of gender equality, has become part and parcel of what it means to be a ‘real’ Dutch citizen.⁶ This sexually liberated identity gets reified all too quickly, as sociologists Mepschen, Duyvendak and Tonkens have argued: ‘In order to criticize Muslims as backwards and as enemies of European culture, gay rights are now heralded as if they have been the foundation of European culture for centuries’ (Mepschen a.o. 2010, 965). So, sexual nationalism masks how recent the accomplishment of gay rights in the West is, and it also masks the variety of views on the topic of homosexuality in Dutch society among non-Muslims. Even though acceptance of LGBT people is generally high in the Netherlands, this acceptance is often ‘thin’ and does for example hardly include acceptance of same sex intimacies in public (Kuyper 2015). There are recurring debates about civil servants who refuse to marry same-sex couples, about LGBT-teachers and sexual education in Christian schools. Also, sexual nationalism denies the divergent views on homosexuality and homosexual practices among Muslims. Though acceptance and tolerance of homosexuality among religious groups in the Netherlands is lower, on average, than among secular groups, a majority of Turkish-Dutch and Moroccan-Dutch—the largest Muslim groups in the Netherlands—answers the question ‘homosexual men and women should be able to lead the lives they want’ in the affirmative (52 and 62 per cent, respectively) (Huijink 2014).

In her speech, Hirsi Ali contrasts the situation in the Netherlands with ‘Africa’: a whole continent personified by her family. Burnier’s authorship and choice of subject forms a stark contrast with her grandmother’s refusal to even recognize women’s existence. Gerard Reve is heralded as the defender of free speech: his Donkey quote could not have been translated in Africa. Thus, by projecting a progressive and linear logic on the opposition Netherlands and Africa, Reve and Burnier function in a sexual-nationalist discourse in which the Netherlands is ‘already’ far ahead.

But this discourse has to be nuanced also with respect to the writers invoked here, especially Reve. David Bos has argued that to depict Reve as a victim of orthodox religion, or as a hero of free speech who singlehandedly sexually liberated the Netherlands, implies downplaying the important role of Dutch pastors, ministers and theologians in reforming views on sexuality (Bos 2006).⁷ And while Hirsi Ali’s political stances were mostly directed against *any* form of religion, Reve actually sought to defend the right to experience his faith in his own way. Moreover, Reve was not a mere victim either: he actively requested the public prosecutor to come to

⁶ See also Wekker (2009) and Duyvendak (2011).

⁷ Oosterhuis (1992) was the first to point out the relatively tolerant views on homosexuality among Roman-Catholic pastoral workers in the 1950s and 1960s.

a verdict, and added new quotations from his work to the dossier. The prosecutor, in turn, was not just an accuser, but called Reve a ‘fellow Christian’ (Bos 2006, 42). Seemingly straightforward oppositions therefore break down under closer scrutiny.

As goes for any type of nationalism, representations of this communal identity are crucial for its construction. In Hirsi Ali’s speech, *writers* function as the embodiment of this sexually liberated national identity, and this is the second reason why I think her speech is interesting. Hirsi Ali does not for example point at important symbolic moments like the first Gay Pride in the Netherlands (‘Roze Zaterdag’, Pink Saturday in 1977), or the legalisation of same-sex marriage (in 2001) to make her point, but to writers, to literature. And she is not the only one for whom writers fulfil such a role, as the rhetorical structure of her speech, in which she assumes both writers to be well-known, already demonstrates.

In the history of Dutch sexual liberation, at least in the cultural memory of this past, writers and their works apparently play an important role. This indeed seems to be the case. To give just one other example of Gerard Reve’s symbolic function, one could refer to the 10-year commemoration, 6 May 2012, of the murder of the Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn, who was openly homosexual and critical of multiculturalism. All Dutch media reported on this event, and all media mentioned the fact that a fellow party-member of Fortuyn’s read a poem by Gerard Reve, without however mentioning even once which poem it concerned. The presence of Reve’s poem alone already symbolically supported the sexual-nationalist views of the political party *Leefbaar Nederland* (Liveable Netherlands) to which Fortuyn belonged.

This brings me to the topic I want to explore further in this article: the way cultural artefacts in general and literature more specifically, function in the history and memory of sexual liberation, both in national and transnational contexts. The large transformations regarding sexuality that could be witnessed in Europe and the US during the 1960s and 1970s had legal, medical-technological, political and social dimensions. Historians have written about the invention of the pill, political activism for gay and women’s rights, and growing consumerism as important forces in the ambiguous and uneven process of sexual liberation (Herzog 2011). Less attention has been paid to the strong cultural dimensions of these transformations in the sexual landscape. In the Dutch context, this lack of attention has been lamented (Schnabel 1990). Often, the function of cultural artefacts like novels and films is either taken for granted, or does not receive much systematic historical attention at all (Allyn 2001).⁸ When taken for granted, the function commonly attributed to cultural artefacts—novels, films, plays, songs—is as addressing or lifting sexual taboos. Much research in literary gender studies and sexuality studies has focused on the cultural analysis of individual texts, their potential subversiveness and the discursive construction of (new) sexual identities, which could be regarded as tying in with the idea of a taboo-lifting function of art and literature. Much less academic work has been done into the historical reception and dissemination of cultural artefacts, and consequently their (changing) cultural function, nationally and internationally. What, exactly, was the actual societal role of these works, and to

⁸ The opposite approach so to say, namely an interest in the way sexuality features and is part of literary history has received more scholarly attention, see Pease (2000), Glass (2006), Ladenson (2007).

what extent can we take the rhetoric of sexual liberation seriously? In order to better understand who perceives how and which sexual taboos are being breached through novels and films, and how this changes over time, more systematic historical research is necessary.

A second aspect of the cultural dimensions I would like to draw attention to, is to how cultural narratives have played an important role in helping emancipating groups make sense of themselves, and becoming intelligible to others.⁹ Here, like in the previous point, the idea that novels and films provide models for (self-)understanding has fuelled much research in literary gender and sexuality studies, or has even been foundational to the disciplines as such: just think of how Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's analysis of nineteenth century novels by women authors has shaped feminist studies (Gilbert and Gubar 1979), or how Monique Wittig or Jean Genet are considered to have inspired queer theory (Hogeland 1998; Gerhard 2001). However, the question as to what the broader women's movement or sexual reformers were actually reading, on what terms they evaluated books and films, in short how the actual historical formation of their reading took place, has received much less academic attention. To give just one example: the famous Australian gay rights activist and scholar Dennis Altman starts his classic *Homosexual: oppression and liberation* (1971) with his own formative reading biography, in which writers like James Baldwin and Gore Vidal prominently figure. For gay activists in the United States, Australia and Europe, these names, among others, functioned as points of recognition, as symbolic markers of a sexual identity. Hence, writers, artists and their works function in articulating forms of belonging to sexual minorities, but at the same time they also function in stressing the *transnational* character of sexual liberation, symbolizing the mobility of new ideas and ideologies regarding sexuality.

Nowadays, sexual liberation forms an important, albeit contested reference point in debates on culture and identity, in which writers and artists sometimes figure as national icons of sexual liberation. In the Netherlands, a seemingly straightforward historical narrative of progress and increasing sexual freedom about Dutch post-war society has culminated in a 'sexual nationalism', as illustrated in the example above. In Dutch political discourse, a self-image of sexual open-mindedness, especially towards homosexuality, has taken centre stage in debates about the role of Islam in contemporary multi-ethnic society. The presence of literature in Dutch cultural memory testifies to its function in articulating this 'sexually liberated' national identity. In the Netherlands, writers like Jan Wolkers, Jan Cremer or Gerard Reve are commonly referred to as triggers of the Dutch sexual revolution. For example, when Jan Wolkers died in 2007, the country's largest newspaper *De Telegraaf* headlined Wolkers was a 'literary motor behind the sexual revolution'. In a short poll the newspaper asked its readers if they agreed to the statement that Wolkers and Cremer triggered the sexual revolution; 57% supported the statement.¹⁰ So, writers and their works also function in the articulation of *national* belongings.

⁹ See also Paul Eakin's work on narrative modes of self-knowledge (Eakin 1999).

¹⁰ 'Jan Wolkers mandatory in high school; together with Cremer literary motor behind sexual revolution. ('Jan Wolkers verplichte kost scholieren; Samen met Cremer literaire motor achter seksuele revolutie'.

This article aims to explore these cultural dimensions of sexual liberation in more depth and to suggest paths for future research of these cultural dimensions. While readers may perceive an example like the one about Dennis Altman as fairly obvious ('of course he was influenced by writers!'), we have not really examined yet how literature—and other cultural and narrative forms for that matter, but I will focus on literature here—played a part in the shaping of both individual and collective identities at a particular historical moment in time. The apparent symbiosis between literature and societal transformations in the sixties is remarkable and points to the function of literature in the post-war period, when novels functioned as an important social platform for broaching moral controversies, and articulated seminal cultural repertoires for identity construction.

I think we still have to come to terms with the realization that it was a specific historical constellation, with a very specific socio-cultural climate and literary culture that provided important channels for the spreading of new ideas about sexuality and sexual liberation. One such specific aspect seems to be the coincidence of an increasing significance attributed to sex in the course of the twentieth century (Herzog 2011), with a growing number of novels written in a confessional mode (Radstone 2007). While sexuality was becoming the major source of 'truth' about the subject, literature evolved into a leading confessional, truth-producing discourse (Foucault 1978). Confessional novels provide intimate access to the (sex) lives of their characters. Confessions are future-oriented, directed towards absolution and becoming free, and thus easily linked to notions of modernity and progress, though confessions may play out differently for men and women (Radstone 2007). These specific features of the confessional novel, combined with the seminal cultural function literature had for the largest part of the twentieth century warrant a focus on the role of literature in analysing the dissemination of sexual identity models and scripts. Guiding questions to investigate the specificities of this literary culture and its function in articulating and disseminating notions of sexual liberation are: what are the functions ascribed to writers and their works in sexual transformations of the 1960s/70s, in different countries, in different periods? To what extent are these transformations captured in national terms, or do they travel across national borders? What role do writers and their works play in cultural memory, nationally and internationally? By conceiving of—in this case—literature as what Stephen Greenblatt has called 'lines of transmission' (Greenblatt 2010, 12), namely transporters and channels of ideas, but also as social media in the sense that novels connect people and their reception provides platforms for the exchange of ideas, we can begin to find answers to these questions.

Methodologically, these questions are not so easy to tackle. How to go about researching the cultural dimensions of sexual liberation? We would like to know about the ways novels inspired, connected, affected or even activated their readers, but how to capture a novel's 'capacity to actually change the minds of its readers

Footnote 10 continued

De Telegraaf 23-10-2007). Another national newspaper *Wolkers* also connected to the sexual revolution: 'Schrijver Jan Wolkers overleden' in *Trouw* 19-10-2007.

and to mobilize their affects' (Leerssen 2010, 237)? An early attempt to assess how gay readers perceived the influence of reading fiction by interviewing them, aptly titled *You got it from all those books*, did not yield any clear results (Grubb 1984). Exploring the mobilizing forces of literature by analysing 'external' and quantitative data like the number of reviews, editions or translations will be conducive in assessing the scope of certain works and writers, but a qualitative assessment of the type of criteria and judgments reviewers use will be as essential as the quantitative analysis to a better understanding of *how* works had an impact. In what follows I will use some quantitative analysis but concentrate on the more qualitative methods and present preliminary results of three different strategies to investigate the cultural dimensions of sexual liberation in the Netherlands.

The first research strategy proposed here is to analyse the reception and later reputation in mainstream Dutch newspapers of writers and their works who were notorious for their explicitness about sex in the 1960s–1970s, with the aim to track changes in those reputations and how these relate to ideas about sexual liberation, and to explore which types of arguments are used for evaluating their works: aesthetic and/or moral, national and/or international.¹¹ The second method I will explore is the analysis of magazines of subcultural movements; to be precise, the Dutch society for sexual reform and the homosexual movement. Here my question will be which literary works are being reviewed, and which evaluative categories reviewers employ. This should give us an insight in the function these sexual liberation movements attribute to literary works, something we can then compare to the way mainstream newspapers evaluate writers. Thirdly, I will discuss references to writers in Dutch political discourse, from the 1960s onwards. References to writers and quotations from literary works in parliamentary debates can tell us something about the reputation of these writers; also, the political (progressive or conservative) motives with which they are quoted are informative for gaining insight into the perceived function of literature.

Writers and Sexual Liberation in Mainstream Newspapers

Obviously, novels are first and foremost mentioned and discussed in newspapers when they are news, so when they appear. After this initial moment of reception, the later reputation and dissemination of particular novels or writers in newspapers becomes visible mostly through references to previous work when new novels appear, through comparisons with other writers, at moments when novels are adapted for the stage or the screen, and lastly at newsworthy biographical moments (which may include a range of possible events connected to celebrity such as prizes, scandals, or death). Here, I will discuss two examples of how reviews may help to understand how notions of sexual liberation changed over time, by looking, firstly, at the reception of Jan Wolkers' *Kort Amerikaans* ('Crew Cut', 1962), and by

¹¹ Delpher.nl was used for this analysis. Delpher.nl is the largest collection of digitized newspapers in the Netherlands although some important national papers are missing (notably *Trouw* and *de Volkskrant*).

tracing, secondly, the diachronic reception of James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956) in Dutch newspapers.

As detailed above, at the time of his death Jan Wolkers (1925–2007) was described in terms of being a literary motor of the Dutch sexual revolution. In 1962, Wolkers published his first novel *Kort Amerikaans*, after two collections of short stories. The reception of this novel, about a young artist trying to find his way among the equally insane worlds of Nazi-collaborators and resistance fighters in the final year of the Second World War, was predominantly positive. Most of the reviews from late 1962, early 1963, focus on the war plot and hardly touch upon the topic of sex. The novel's literary merits are evaluated in terms of verisimilitude, in which the plot development is found lacking by some critics: 'Even a natural talent sometimes struggles with a "natural development"'.¹² If the novel's sexual content is discussed at all, it is not necessarily considered to be controversial, or even to the contrary: '[Henry] Miller considerably increased the doses obscenity, which still caused a shock in the 1930s. In a book like *Kort Amerikaans* [...] by Jan Wolkers, such scenes are no more than gap stoppers in a futile story, and truly deadly boring', as a regional newspaper opined.¹³ A teenager who is invited to comment on the novel thinks Wolkers is 'being rude on purpose to mask clumsiness'.¹⁴ A discussion about the sexual content only starts in March 1963, when an older writer (Godfried Bomans) accuses Wolkers of 'being obsessed with sexuality, like almost all young people'.¹⁵ When in November 1963 a critical review is published in the magazine of the Dutch Society for Sexual Reform (NVSH), which reproaches Wolkers for being voyeuristic, among other things (on which more below), Wolkers reacts by nailing dead fish, pigtailed and chicken's limbs on the NVSH-building in Amsterdam. This protest again receives some media attention.¹⁶

This brief exploration shows that literary critics do not necessarily see Wolkers at the start of his career as breaking sexual taboos. Months after publication of *Kort Amerikaans*, it is criticism of fellow writers—both of being too obsessed with sexuality and of not being progressive enough—that helps to keep Wolkers in the public eye regarding sexual matters. In June 1964, two years after its publication, *Kort Amerikaans* is grouped together with other bestselling novels by Jan Cremer

¹² 'Onderduiker gaat onder in krankzinnige wereld KRONIEK'. *Het vrije volk : democratisch-socialistisch dagblad*. Rotterdam, 02-11-1962. Accessed 10-12-2016, <http://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010953983:mpeg21:a0362>.

¹³ 'Miller vergrootte de dosis obsceniteit in hoge mate, hetgeen in de dertiger jaren nog steeds een schok veroorzaakte. In een boek als 'Kort Amerikaans' van de dertigjarige Nederlandse auteur Jan Wolkers zijn zulke scènes niet meer dan stoplappen in een op zichzelf onbeduidend verhaal en werkelijk dodelijk vervelend'. (*Nieuwsblad van het Noorden* 28 Dec 1962).

¹⁴ 'KORT gelezen laten wij'. *Algemeen Handelsblad*. Amsterdam, 23-02-1963. Accessed 10-12-2016, <http://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=KBNRC01:000035905:mpeg21:a0295>.

¹⁵ Bomans had been asked to reflect on the situation of Dutch literature on the occasion of his fiftieth birthday. Note that Wolkers at the time was already thirty-seven! 'Daarbij is hij, zoals bijna alle jongeren, geobsedeerd door seksualiteit'. In: 'Bomans over de literatuur'. *Leeuwarder courant: hoofdblad van Friesland*. Leeuwarden, 11-03-1963. Accessed 27-12-2016, <http://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010616489:mpeg21:a0086>.

¹⁶ 'Schokkend Kunstfruit'. *Het vrije volk : democratisch-socialistisch dagblad*. Rotterdam, 02-01-1964. Accessed 27-12-2016, <http://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010954337:mpeg21:a0177>.

and Gerard Reve as one of the books which reached the best-selling lists because of ‘other than just literary qualities’, i.e. its shocking content.¹⁷

A second example illustrates how the changing evaluation of literary works may depend on changing notions of sexual liberation, and comes from the Dutch reception and reputation of James Baldwin’s novel *Giovanni’s Room*, one of the works Dennis Altman explicitly mentions in his autobiography and now widely considered a ‘gay classic’. *Giovanni’s Room* was not reviewed when it appeared in 1956, but it was nine years later when the Dutch translation was published. Baldwin himself was present at the book presentation in 1965, and ten articles in various Dutch newspapers appeared. In 1965, *Giovanni’s Room* is called a ‘literary bomb’ by reputation. The Dutch publisher states the translation could not have been published before, suggesting that the topic of *Giovanni’s Room* is considered ‘difficult’, which can only refer to the homosexual theme for Baldwin was already known in the Netherlands for his role in black activism.¹⁸ One reviewer refers to the American reception of the novel in order to prepare the readers not only for the literary achievement but also the ‘shock value’ of this book which in ten years hasn’t lost any of its significance, according to him—not just for an American audience, but for the whole of the ‘so-called-civilized-world’. The praise in literary terms is that Baldwin has described his characters ‘lovingly’ and ‘with care’, and that nothing of the ‘gloominess’ of the novel is ‘unreal’.¹⁹ Thus, realism is considered to be a literary achievement, and this will be a constant element: the way realism is used as an argument in discussing potentially controversial novels.

When in the 1980s a new edition of *Giovanni’s Room* is published, and the novel is adapted to the stage, a little surge in interest in Baldwin’s work is visible. Ideas about the liberating value of *Giovanni’s Room* appear to have changed. One reviewer now refers to Baldwin’s novel as a ‘generation’s bible’ for those who felt a victim of their ‘being-so’ (gay), but adds that nowadays (1987) the novel is by many considered as too negative, not fitting the age of gay liberation.²⁰ The play however ‘shows that Baldwin’s text is more than a melodramatic product of his time’, but a real ‘evergreen’.²¹ The use of ‘melodramatic’—melodrama being the genre of exaggerated emotions—once more indicates realism is the yardstick against which literature is measured. What was supposedly realist in the 1960s (the gloominess) now runs the risk of being melodramatic. Gay Pride does not like to be reminded of a less out-and-proud past, demonstrating how the times have changed.

¹⁷ ‘HAMLET—BILLY—CAPPA—TOPLESS—DUPLEX’. *Algemeen Handelsblad*. Amsterdam, 27-06-1964. Accessed 23-12-2016, <http://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=KBNRC01:000034527:mpeg21:a0222>.

¹⁸ ‘James Baldwin in Amsterdam’. *Algemeen Handelsblad*. Amsterdam, 09-10-1965. Accessed 19-12-2016, <http://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=KBNRC01:000034637:mpeg21:a0056>.

¹⁹ B. van Opzeeland, ‘Literaire bom’. James Baldwin beschreef homofiele verhouding. *Vrije volk* 26-11-1965.

²⁰ Pim Wiersinga, ‘Een verfrissende bewerking van Giovanni’s room’. *De waarheid* 5-9-1987. Michael Zeeman in the *Leeuwarder Courant* does not agree, he thinks it’s a tame play, and too didactic.

²¹ Wiersinga, 1987.

Literature and Film in Countercultural Magazines

The second research strategy for assessing the cultural dimensions of sexual liberation in the Netherlands I would propose is to analyse if and how literary works were reviewed and discussed in magazines of the Dutch sexual reform movement and the Dutch gay and lesbian movement. In short: what, and how did they read? To what extent did writers and their works feature in discussions about sexuality? There is an abundance of resources here, especially for the gay and lesbian movement that knew multiple magazines. Many of these have not been digitized yet, and a full assessment would easily fill a dissertation.²² Within the constraints of this article, I will briefly look at the monthly magazine of the Dutch Society for Sexual Reform: *Verstandig ouderschap* ('Responsible parenthood', 1960–1966) and its successor *Sextant* (1966–1969); and the monthly of the COC, the Dutch society for gays and lesbians: *Vriendschap* ('Friendship', 1960–1964) and *Dialoog* ('Dialogue', 1965–1967).²³

In the magazines of the Dutch Society for Sexual Reform there is relatively little mention of (literary) writers, or reviewing of fictional works until 1966. Only in 1968 a regular book review rubric starts. cursory references to writers can be found however in various articles, which demonstrate a self-evident familiarity with writers like the French André Gide and the Dutch Simon Vestdijk: literature is part of the cultural 'ecosystem'.²⁴ Books reviewed in *Verstandig Ouderschap* are often clearly discussed for their subject matter and not for their literary qualities—such as the Dutch biography and translations of De Sade, a Dutch novel with a sadomasochist theme (Alfred Kossmann's *Diary of a masochist*), or a novel about a 'public woman'. Aesthetic judgments do play a role however, as the discussion of Wolkers' novel *Kort Amerikaans* illustrates. *Kort Amerikaans* first receives a very positive review in *Sextant*, and is praised for its openness, but a later article is very critical.²⁵ This provides an interesting insight into the opinions about the sexual explicitness of his work in the context of the NVSH: a society advocating sexual reform, a.o. in the form of sex education, and more openness towards non-normative sexual mores. The magazine's editors prepare their readers for Lopez' opinion which deviates from the previous, positive, review: Lopez' piece is 'written from a strongly personal view', it 'may be one-sided'; but 'that's why we gladly provide space for this heart-cry'.²⁶ In what is in many ways a feminist critique, though he does not use that term himself, the author of the second article, Lopez, accuses Wolkers of 'narrowmindedness under the guise of indiscretion'. His main concern is Wolkers' voyeurism and the way he portrays women as inhuman, comparing their

²² The historian Alphen and Elise van (2016) has done groundbreaking work on the way the gay and lesbian movement self-identified, without specifically addressing the topic of writers and literature.

²³ *Dialoog* was succeeded by *De Schakelkrant* (1967–1968) and *Seq* (1969), which were not included for analysis in this article.

²⁴ F.E. Frenkel, 'Vreemd proefschrift over homofilie'. *Verstandig Ouderschap* Jul/Aug 1967, 219–221.

²⁵ Respectively: Sybrand Koops, 'Recensie', *Verstandig Ouderschap* Mar 1963 and Esteban Lopez, 'Jan Wolkers onder de loep'. *Verstandig Ouderschap* Nov 1963, 311–312.

²⁶ Esteban Lopez, 'Jan Wolkers onder de loep'. *Verstandig Ouderschap* Nov 1963, 311.

bodies to ‘pudding’ or ‘gummy’. An ill-chosen metaphor, thinks Lopez, for ‘no matter how frustrated or distorted, the play with the senses is bound by reality’. Wolkers, in other words, does not adhere to the norm of literary realism according to Lopez, not appreciating that for Wolkers’ protagonist this perceived lifelessness might just be his issue. He challenges Wolkers to express male vulnerabilities as well—‘Why so much restraint in 1963?’—expressing the sentiment that Wolkers is not yet progressive *enough* in sexual matters. So Lopez adds an idealist aspect to the desired representation of reality. As we saw above, both Wolkers and mainstream media picked up on this review; *Sextant*’s ambition to provide a platform for debate surely succeeded.

This platform function, triggered by literature, is also visible when in April 1965 *Verstandig Ouderschap* announces the first issue of a new magazine *Dialogo* (Dialogue), of which the writer Gerard Reve is an editor. *Verstandig Ouderschap* is literally of two minds about the new magazine. On one page it welcomes the new initiative of hetero- en homosexuals to cooperate in one magazine, and underlines the importance of dialogue, on the next it fiercely condemns Gerard Reve’s contribution to the issue (‘Misslag’—mishit): this contribution was ‘Letter to my bank’ (‘Brief aan mijn bank’) with the famous Donkey scene which would result in a trial.²⁷ Author Richter Roegholt of the second piece stresses the importance to ‘behave normally’, and accuses Reve of having written a ‘venomous’ piece. The NVSH is clearly trying to juggle ideas about the emancipation of homosexuals with ideas about decency. This balancing act manifests itself in many book reviews, not just regarding homosexuality. It is the fine line of wanting to be considered decent (which often comes down to compliance with the existing norm), while wanting to change society in matters of sexuality as well. The fierce rejection of Reve’s piece by Roegholt demonstrates an attitude to literature shared by many reviews in *Sextant*: literature is not primarily seen in terms of *l’art pour l’art*, as an autonomous realm, but rather as a representation of reality. At the same time there is an idealist ring to many reviews: reviewers tend to dislike dystopian worldviews.

Some examples may illustrate this preference for truthful representation with a positive outlook: while the Danish Sven Holm is called a ‘realist’ writer of ‘sunny sex’, John Rechy’s *City of Night* (now a gay cult-novel) is criticized because it offers ‘no perspective’. Two sex-novels by the American Francis Pollini are criticized for adding a ‘socio-critical sauce’ solely for commercial reasons (apparently it is not sex that sells, but social critique). Another American novel, Shane Stevens’ dystopian *Val dood man* (Dutch translation) is praised for showing what the consequences are of ‘the disappearance of sexual taboos in a normless society’, something the reviewer clearly does not want to happen.²⁸ Marriage is a different matter: the dystopian way many contemporary Dutch and Flemish novels write about marriage is used to argue for the bankruptcy of the marital institution.²⁹ The author has little understanding for the resignation characters show with their

²⁷ Rie Ykema-Steenbergen, ‘Homofielen willen brug naar maatschappij’, *Verstandig Ouderschap* Apr 1965, 104–105; Richter Roegholt ‘Misslag’ *Verstandig Ouderschap* Apr 1965, 105.

²⁸ Jaap Joppe, Boekbespreking (Pollini *De grote versierder en Sexcursie*). *Sextant* Oct 1968, 26.

²⁹ Marc Bral, ‘Huwelijk en gezin in de Nederlandse roman na 1945’. *Sextant* Oct 1969, 42–43.

bad marriages. This resignation stems from a ‘previous psychological climate’ ‘unknown to us and perhaps completely changed’: here, progressive ideals regarding marriage shape expectations about fiction.

A similar mixture of idealism and realism characterizes the evaluation of literature in magazines of the gay and lesbian movement. *Vriendschap* (‘Friendship’), the COC’s monthly since 1949, structurally devotes more attention to literature than the magazines of the society for sexual reform. It not only features reviews but also regularly publishes short stories and poems written by members, sometimes under pseudonym. These are mostly homo-erotic stories, situated in ancient Rome or in the locker room, with an eroticism which is not always appreciated by readers.³⁰ Interest in ancient Greeks and Romans speaks from articles about Sappho, Ovid, and a film about King Herod. While there is much attention to role models from the past like the Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca and various Dutch poets, there is a pervasive desire to be ‘modern’ as well. Maps Valk’s lesbian novel *Mijn vriendin Jacoba* (1960) is praised for its modern setting; another novel from the same year is chastised for not having a happy ending and thus not being modern enough.³¹ Writers are clearly important as a role model, and so is their work: to provide the plots and cultural scripts for imagining a life as a homosexual.

Vriendschap’s successor *Dialoog* (1965–1967) had a mixed editorial board of homosexuals and heterosexuals to underline its mission for the integration of homosexuals into society. Several editors were writers themselves, so the large share of articles in *Dialoog* related to literature is hardly surprising. Like in *Vriendschap*, many novels and films, both Dutch and foreign, are reviewed for their homosexual subject matter, but other themes which can be related to sexual liberation find their way into the magazine as well, like ‘love’, or ‘being yourself’. The wish to broaden the scope of themes speaks from a review of Ewald Vanvugt’s *Darwin en gezellen* (1964), where the reviewer appreciates the fact that the two male protagonists serve as a stand-in for what he suggests is a universal phenomenon: adultery. ‘While homosexuality as a theme is not new in literature, we appreciate the attempt to break a number of taboos’: in this case the taboo of having a lover on the side in a (gay) relationship of many years in which the partners have lost their sexual attraction.³² This majoritizing view on homosexuality ties in with *Dialoog*’s mission for integration. Scholarship as well as fiction about homosexuality receive a lot of attention in *Dialoog*, and are considered equally important, as editors stress, for furthering the cause of gay and lesbian emancipation. So, maybe even more so than in the sexual reform movement, literature is part of the cultural ecosystem in the gay and lesbian magazines—not only to confirm a homosexual identity as in *Vriendschap*, but also to address nonexclusively homosexual issues such as adultery.

³⁰ *Vriendschap* Mar 1960, 47.

³¹ As the reviewer asks: ‘When will there be a modern homoerotic novel with a “happy ending”, or is this still not possible?’ *Vriendschap* Jul/Aug 1960, 18.

³² *Dialoog*, 1965 no. 1, 24.

Writers in Political Discourse

The third and last strategy to analyse the cultural dimensions of sexual liberation I want to propose here, is the analysis of parliamentary records. In order to assess a writer's reputation and the cultural reverberations of his/her work outside the sometimes-narrow circles of literary culture, parliamentary records provide a relevant and fascinating source. Every now and then politicians refer to writers in their speeches and parliamentary debates, and these references are illuminating about the popularity of writers in different periods, the contexts for a writer's controversial status or popularity, and they give insight into the ways people use or understand literature. In that sense, parliamentary records may well be more informative about the cultural work that novels/writers do than sales numbers or number of print runs. Parliamentary debates are a genre with formal features, such as designated speech turns, and use of rhetorical strategies, and in that sense do not resemble the way ordinary readers would discuss the latest novel they read. On the other hand, Bourdieu-an mechanisms similar to other types of conversation are at work in parliament that have to do with the cultural capital references to literature may produce: from the bare necessity to be understood, to the wish to appeal to a specific audience or to distinguish oneself as a knowledgeable speaker. What parliamentary sources show, I want to argue, is that the way politicians use references to writers, the kind of cultural capital these references produce can indeed be related to notions of progress and sexual liberation.

For this part, the *Handelingen der Staten Generaal* (the Dutch Parliamentary Hansard) have been mined between 1945 and 2016 for sixteen Dutch writers: Anna Blaman, Andreas Burnier, Remco Campert, Jan Cremer, Arnon Grunberg, Hella Haasse, Maarten't Hart, A.F.Th. van der Heijden, Willem Frederik Hermans, Frans Kellendonk, Anja Meulenbelt, Harry Mulisch, Gerard Reve, Simon Vestdijk, Simon Vinkenoog, and Jan Wolkers (see Table 1).³³ This yields a wealth of material that warrants more research; for now I will only be drawing conclusions based on initial observations related to the research question. It is good to point out that the number of hits does not speak for itself, as not all hits are relevant to the question I am trying to answer here. For example, nearly all references to Simon Vestdijk after 1995 refer to streets and schools named after him. Though this does say something about Vestdijk's legacy in the Netherlands, it tells us little about the way he is remembered or referred to in a more qualitative sense. Based on these records, I think three different types of references to writers can be discerned, although the boundaries are somewhat porous.

Firstly, writers are referred to in debates that concern them directly, for example when parliament discusses whether writers should be subsidized. At times this leads to debates about the relation between government and art. This category of references is especially interesting within the context of sexual liberation when there

³³ For this part, the Parliamentary Hansards of The Netherlands, 1814–1995 and 1995–present were used. These writers were chosen for their broadly acknowledged status as prominent Dutch writers, for having written bestseller novels, and/or the publication of work that caused controversy at some point. They are by no means the only writers ever mentioned in parliament, but because a comprehensive overview was not aimed for, others (f.e. Achterberg, Nijhoff, and Lucebert) were not included.

Table 1 References to Dutch writers in parliament, 1945–present

	1945–1995	1995–present*
Writers		
Anna Blaman	5	4
Andreas Burnier	1	2
Remco Campert	10	13
Jan Cremer	28	2
Arnon Grunberg	0	28**
Hella S. Haasse	8	12
Maarten't Hart	14	7
A.F.Th. van der Heijden	0	6
Willem Frederik Hermans	15	24
Frans Kellendonk	2	1
Anja Meulenbelt	1	1
Harry Mulisch	33	38
Gerard Reve	44	37
Simon Vestdijk	27	73***
Simon Vinkenoog	5	5
Jan Wolkers	21	20

* Parliamentary records are available through two different databases

** 26 hits after 2010, when Grunberg started writing a daily mini-column on the front page of *de Volkskrant*, one of the main newspapers

*** Nearly all hits refer to streets and schools named after Vestdijk

is debate about whether some writers deserve government funding or if their work is morally reprehensible. For example, in 1963, senator Cammelbeeck of the social-democrats quotes the lesbian writer Anna Blaman (1915–1960) at length to defend his argument that writers do have a sense of morality, when the budget of the Ministry for Education, Culture and Sciences is debated which includes the subsidies for writers.³⁴

A second type of references to writers is when quotations from their work are used as part of a rhetorical repertoire in debates on topics that do not concern the writers themselves, for example when MP Boris van der Ham (D'66; liberal democrats) quotes Gerard Reve's phrase 'the Netherlands is a cosy marshland' in a debate on the desirability of introducing the possibility of referenda, to make a point of the slow speed at which things change in the Netherlands.³⁵ Arguably, by referencing Reve, Van der Ham (an openly homosexual) not only rhetorically supported his argument on the referendum, but also implicitly underlined a position on homosexuality. Though references to writers always have the function of demonstrating cultural capital, I would distinguish a third category of references in which writers are invoked explicitly to symbolize or exemplify an issue debated by parliamentarians: often freedom of speech, or gay emancipation, or a certain attitude in life. Hirsi Ali's speech I discussed before, though not given in parliament, is a good example here. There are similar examples, like when the State Secretary of Education, Culture and Sciences Karin Adelmund refers to writers in a debate about the new Gay Emancipation Nota, in 2000:

³⁴ *Kamerstukken I* 1962/1963; 14 May 1963, 2282.

³⁵ *Kamerstukken II* 2003/2004; 30 Sep 2004, 209.

It really appeals to me that Mr Dittrich also mentioned the Netherlands is still a guiding country in this matter... I'm glad we're not going back to the days of Radcliffe [sic] Hall's *Well of Loneliness*, and Anna Blaman, and Andreas Burnier. That is really far behind us.³⁶

Interesting in this quote is that Adelmund, a known feminist, only mentions women writers, while Gerard Reve was probably more widely known. It is highly ironical that she mentions Burnier in one breath with Hall and Blaman, because in 1965 Burnier wrote the first Dutch lesbian novel with a happy ending, which at the time was perceived as a break from more gloomy works like the earlier Hall's and Blaman's. So without apparent knowledge of the differences between these writers, Adelmund uses references to them to mark the modernity and progressiveness of the policy proposal she is defending, which she connects to a sense of Dutch identity.

In a parliamentary debate about Islamic activism in 2007, Halbe Zijlstra of the liberal party (VVD) refers to Reve as symbolizing homosexuality as being under threat from religion, similar to how Hirsi Ali had quoted Reve before:

Do you remember that in 1966, Gerard Reve's *Closer to Thee* was published? There he described God as a donkey, and he even had sex with it. The left loved it. If it was about faith, and apostasy, anything was allowed, for religious people had to leave their faith behind. But where is the left, forty years later? Where is the left, when faith and apostasy are concerned? We should not aggrieve people, it is said. Why this difference? Why was Gerard Reve a hero, and why isn't Theo van Gogh?³⁷

Zijlstra is probably correct to observe that Reve's symbolic function in the early 2000s shifts from being used by politicians on the left side of the spectrum like Adelmund, to liberals such as himself and politicians from populist parties like Geert Wilders' PVV.

Conclusion

Debates about sexual aspects of literary works, sometimes leading to legal disputes (Beekman and Grüttemeier 1997, Ladenson 2007), always involve both moral and aesthetic values, no matter whether they take place within the literary sections of mainstream culture, within cultures of sexual minorities, or in political discourse.

³⁶ 'Mij spreekt zeer aan dat ook de heer Dittrich aangaf dat Nederland nog steeds vooroploopt in deze kwestie. [...] Mij spreekt het zeer aan dat wij niet teruggaan naar de tijd van Radcliffe [sic] Hall's *The well of loneliness* (Bron der eenzaamheid) en Anna Blaman en Andreas Burnier. Dat ligt echt ver achter ons.' *Kamerstukken II* 2000/2001; 5 July 2001, 26.

³⁷ 'Weet u nog dat in 1966 het boek *Nader tot U* uitkwam van Gerard van het Reve? Daarin beschreef hij God als een ezel, en daarmee had hij nog seks ook. Links vond het prachtig. Als het over geloof en geloofsafval ging, kon alles, want de gelovigen moesten toch vooral van het geloof af. Maar waar is links veertig jaar later? Waar is links als het gaat over geloof en geloofsafval? Wij mogen mensen niet krenken, wordt er gezegd. Maar waarom dit verschil? Waarom was Gerard van het Reve een held en waarom was Theo van Gogh dat niet?' *Kamerstukken II*, 2006/2007; 6 Sept 2007, 5279.

The analysis of debates about novels and sexuality provide a sharper focus on the categories of judgment that are being used for evaluating novels and their perceived function/agency in society. Novels provide a platform for discussion across different media and different (sub)cultures, sometimes in unexpected and even illogical ways: it seems likely that the criticism Wolkers' *Kort Amerikaans* received of not being liberal enough helped establish Wolkers' reputation as a sexually liberating writer.

Interestingly, my findings so far (mostly from the decade 1960–1970) seem to suggest that both within the society for sexual reform (NVSH), gay/lesbian magazines (*Vriendschap/Dialog*), and mainstream newspapers (regional and national), similar criteria of evaluation were in place, of being 'true to reality'. Realism is a recurring argument that expresses appreciation of the work under review; however, the way realism is used differs. On the one hand, it is used as an aesthetic category as in opposition to melodrama. On the other, realism is used as a social category, and then in opposition to veiled, unrevealing. The widespread use of the realism argument may be considered as a support for Elisabeth Ladenson's argument that the notion of realism as a defence for sexually explicit language is mainstreamed in the course of the twentieth century (Ladenson 2007). From the material discussed here it is less obvious that the idea of *l'art-pour-l'art* is mainstreamed as Ladenson suggests: the magazines under scrutiny discuss literature chiefly as a cultural repository, providing scripts for living, and not as autonomous art works.

More systematic research is necessary to gain a better insight into how changing ideas about literature are important to changing ideas about sexuality within the Dutch context.

By focusing on the historical case of sexual liberation, this research not only has something to say about the cultural dimensions of sexual liberation; it also takes current debates on the relevance of literature in a new direction. It studies the impact of literature both from a top-down and a bottom-up perspective, and thus contributes to a better understanding of the relation between literature as both social and aesthetic practice.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest Author Andeweg declares that she has no conflict of interest.

Human and Animal Rights This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by the author.

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